WORDSWORTH AND HERDER: A STUDY IN COMPARATIVE IDEAS

BY
STEPHEN FRANCIS FOGLE
A.B., Amherst College, 1934
A.M., Syracuse University, 1936

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SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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The history of literature is customarily divided into periods, and these periods are then generally assumed to consist of individual works which possess characteristics which give the entire period a coherence and unity. The original divisions, fairly arbitrary in themselves, have been strengthened by the practice of writers and teachers until they represent formidable barriers to the scrutiny of the actual literature which is supposed to be the basis for the divisions. Thus the label of "Romanticism" is generally understood as imparting some coherence and unity to the body of literature to which it refers. Work produced within certain limits of time is referred to as "Romantic," without there being any agreement as to the meaning of the term.

The purpose of this study is to examine the works of two men who are generally regarded as influential writers of the "Romantic" period, and to attempt to determine what their characteristic ideas and attitudes are. Once those ideas and attitudes toward life have been examined, it is possible to question whether an exact definition of "Romanticism" can be found, whether there is sufficient similarity to make any definition helpful. This study approaches the problem of definition through the history of ideas rather than through a purely historical method, on the assumption that any resemblances of inportance will show themselves in the history of ideas and that no other resemblance is of great importance.

William Wordsworth and Johann Gottfried Herder have been chosen as the subjects for examination, since each stands at the beginning of "Romanticism" in his own country, and each helped to form the critical thought which was to guide the writers who followed him. There have been exhaustive studies of both men, from almost every possible point of view, but their ideas have not been compared and contrasted; they have been considered for the most part as having no connec-

tion whatsoever, although Miss Margaret Sherwood, in her *Undercurrents of Influence in English Romantic Poetry,* has suggested that Wordsworth may have heard in Germany of the ideas of Herder. However, no evidence exists for such an influence, and scant attention need be given the suggestion.

The complete study undertook to examine and to compare the ideas of Woodsworth and Herder as those ideas concern society as a whole, literature as a function of society, literature as a function of the human mind, and the relation of the human individual to the world about him. Since the argument of the study is briefly restated and the conclusion drawn in the final chapter, that chapter is reprinted here.

THE RELATION OF WORDSWORTH AND HERDER TO ROMANTICISM

At the beginning of this study was discussed the difficulty of determining what "Romanticism" means to the person who hears, or even uses, the term. The purpose of this thesis has been to investigate thoroughly and to compare the ideas of two men, both prominent in the history of "Romanticism," to discover whether there are any important similarities between their notions of Man, of Nature and Society, and what those similarities are, if they exist. It was thought best to choose men in different countries and men whose works had no direct connection, with whom there was little likelihood of direct influence. For such a plan, Herder and Wordsworth were satisfactory choices, since each is important to the literature of his own country, and since no demonstrable link exists between the two. The often-used simile of a stream or current to describe the movements of ideas is perhaps faulty; it would be more accurate to speak of a mist or contagion, since the first figure of speech implies a definite direction and a constant movement. Certainly one can explain the appearance of similar ideas in different ideas in different nations on the grounds of contagion, since it is almost impossible to demonstrate a literary quarantine, and it is on such grounds only that one might claim some influence for Herder upon Wordsworth.

Yet there are similarities between the two men in their expressed views on many subjects. It may be valuable to restate here the ways in which their *Weltanschauungen* agreed and differed. For both men, the nation was the most important social unit, beyond, of course, the very personal relations of the immediate family. For them, the nation is more than a political unity, and political government is merely one expression of the interests of the group. The coherence of a people into a nation is organic, based upon a community of interests which cannot be formed or invented and put into practice in a short time. The nation is composed of classes, and is not undifferentiated within the group. But the classes have various functions to perform in relation to the whole group, and any attempt by a member of one class to take over the functions which have by custom and tradition been allotted elsewhere must be productive of disorder within the state. For example, an army must not attempt to dictate the civil government of a nation. Since there are apt to be separate classes within a nation, even though these class divisions are not hard and fast and not expressed in laws, education should be suited to these separate classes. Both Herder and Wordsworth opposed the teaching to workingmen of subjects which had formed the polite accomplishments of gentlemen of leisure.

There are also a number of influences or pressures which help to form a nation into a coherent group. The effect of local circumstances, of roughly similar geographic location, of climate, of all the recurring features of any environment, are considered, although Herder's phrase of *Zeit, Ort, und Umstände* receives far more emphasis and far fuller development than Wordsworth gives to his considerations of environmental circumstances in the *Tract on the Convention of Cintra*. The most important determinant of the national unit for Wordsworth is the institutions which have developed through the history of the group. The customs which exert a hold upon the imagination of a large portion of the population, and the laws which are the formal expressions of many of these customs, act as a steadying influence and guide

for the future. They help to give some guarantee that the future will be recognizable in the terms to which the past has accustomed us. Whether a law or custom is reasonable in the terms of formal logic is not so important a matter as whether it has relevance to the emotional attitudes and preferences of the nation. The churches and the ritual of religion serve a double purpose as means of worship and as social institutions which help to form the individual man into the pattern which the community approves. Thus for both Wordsworth and Herder the church should be a state church, and religious deviation from accepted thought implies also political and cultural deviations. The good man is an individual, but not at the expense of his fellows.

The nation is not a static thing: it develops and decays; it changes with its environment. In Herder's thought the laws which nations obey in their changes are worked out with considerable detail and with considerable evidence from history to support the general contentions. Wordsworth was aware of change within the nation, but did not formulate his observations into a general law. This change and variation within the nation meant for both men that the institutions of the nation must also change. The Church cannot always remain the same; the government must respond to changing conditions and changing needs among its people. Such alterations in the institutions must come about slowly (hence Wordsworth's conservatism), for too great haste might mean a separation of the institutions from the great mass of the nation. But if the institutions are for any reason allowed to remain unchanged or are artificially held static for the benefit of a particular class, the resultant discord will grow into serious trouble.

The French Revolution is an example of the chaos which can result when the institutions of a nation are not allowed to develop naturally, when one section of the people begins to exploit the rest for its own advantage, when the government forgets its obligations to govern in the interests of the whole group and attempts to govern for the few at the expense of the many. Both Herder and Wordsworth originally sympa-

thised very fully with the French cause, and both turned against it. They had hoped that the Revolution would be simply a reform, that it would be able to re-establish harmony between the government and the governed, that it would force the rulers to a sense of responsibility. The failure of the Revolution could have been predicted from their own theories, since it was too sudden a break with the institutions of France as they had developed through the years. Instead of a return to the institutions of the people as a whole and a purification of corrupt practices, the Revolution became an attempt to establish new institutions whose bases were logical instead of traditional, philosophic instead of emotional.

For both men, a nation is to be judged according as it is true to itself. If it succeeds in expressing, over a long period of time, certain characteristics which can be recognized as peculiar to it, it is a successful nation. One must not ask that all nations shall be alike. Wordsworth himself could not approve of all the customs which obtained in Spain at the time of the Peninsular Wars, but he felt that the Spanish had a right to their own customs and habits of living. The imposition of French customs and the exploitation of Spain and Portugal by France would be a tragedy. Similarly, Herder deplored at first the plans of the German Princes to invade France, since the restoration of order from outside a nation could not be really efficacious. Europe was to be a family of national states, with each group enjoying independence. Wordsworth hoped that Italy and Germany would be unified into healthy political units, since they already constituted nations in everything but political being. Herder too wrote in favor of German nationalism and unification.

Their hopes of the French revolution and their wishes for the establishment of independent national states throughout Europe must not be considered as evidence that either of them was a believer in democracy as we know it. Both started out with theories about the evils of government by a few, but both ended by accepting the patterns of government which they found about them. A despot could rule well, if

he ruled in accordance with the traditions and institutions of his land, if he were careful to guide the country along its natural course The criterion for any method of government is whether it remains true to the institutions of the country it is attempting to control. What is excellent government for one nation may be completely unsatisfactory for another.

The perfect world for both men would be a family of peaceful nations, each a developing organism, composed of different classes, each of which performs its relation to the whole and is satisfied with its lot. Each of these nations would possess its own traditions and customs, its own habits of living, and would not attempt to encroach upon or unduly influence any other nation. The development of each nation would be regular and individual, with old institutions dying slowly as they outlived their usefulness and new institutions taking shape as their functions became necessary.

Literature will be a part of each of these nations, for literature is one of the characteristic expressions of national life. Nor is literature to be merely a polite, or upper-class activity. If it is to amount to anything, to have any relevance to the life of the whole nation, it must be based more widely, must find some roots in national life. Naturally, poetry must not confine itself to the lower class. Wordsworth emphasizes in his criticism that he is looking for "manners." Herder uses the word *Sitte*, and finds that Shakespeare is a great poet because of the sources of his poetry in the *Sitten* of the English nation. The *Volk* for Herder is the entire nation, including the upper classes as well, not merely the peasantry; Wordsworth would avoid undue emphasis upon the meaningless "obliquities of city life," and demanded political power also for the yeoman and Westmoreland "statesmen."

So far then as poetry may be considered as the product of a nation, it is the history of the cultural development of a race; its value is partly as an institution, as one other force which will help to preserve a nation and to keep it developing in the way it has been moving. The imagery, the mythology of good poetry will be based upon the common beliefs of the

people for whom it is intended. Its social value is a moral value, since it acquaints one generation with the *mores* which have bound its ancestors.

But poetry is also the product of the individual mind, of a poet who is himself the product of an age, but is also a man, differing from all other men. He cannot escape and should not attempt to escape the impress of his time, his place, and the surrounding world. It would be foolish for a man to think that he could write for an age which differs completely from the one which had produced him. It is the duty of the poet to understand mankind, since he has a function as a sort of spokesman for his fellows. To fulfill this function he must have the ability to discern those qualities which are lasting, which are common to all men and which will therefore be able to evoke a response from all men. The poet can study these qualities best in himself, and it is for this reason that Wordsworth wrote the *Prelude* and that Herder projected a study of his own reactions to the various influences which the world brought to him. This element of commonalty in all men has for both Herder and Wordsworth an ethical significance. The individual will be the better for recognizing it in himself. In Wordsworth it is often referred to as "joy," since it is a sort of ecstatic quality of recognition and response. For Wordsworth, this "joy" is not limited solely to a response to human beings, but can also come from communion with natural objects. A similar quality is that discussed by Herder in his *Humanitätsbriefe*. This *Humanität* is the specifically human quality which makes possible understanding among men. A man without *Humanität* could not understand the strivings and the problems of his fellows. For both Herder and Wordsworth it is important that the poet should possess such a quality in large measure, that he should have the greatest possible sympathy with his fellowmen.

The poet is an especially perceptive individual, in the theories of Herder and of Wordsworth, but every individual mind is of importance. For the mind of man is to both of them the one earthly certainty. It is through the mind that the

individual knows the world, through which he receives sensations, and thus becomes capable of action. The mind is a unit receiving and creating, and cannot be split into separate faculties and anatomized by rules. This mind goes through a series of developments, from childhood to age, each stage having somewhat different characteristics and capabilities. The child is especially receptive of sense impressions, and has as yet little power of creation; the mature man has lost some of his sensitivity, but is able to make use of the impressions which he has been receiving all his life. It is through these sense impressions that the mind comes to feel, in Wordsworth's poetry, that all outside itself may have a separate life, may be animated from within.

Vividness of sense impression is valuable not only in itself, according to Wordsworth and Herder, since it makes the mind more capable of dealing with the environment, but it is valuable also in making the mind more perceptive of God in the world. The more the receptive powers in the mind have been strengthened, the more directly the mind can come to know God. Herder and Wordsworth believed in the orthodox deity of the Christian faith, and each believed in the value of church organization, but the relation of the individual mind to the deity needed no such intermediaries. The mind might know God first through His works, but could hope eventually to have direct perception of Him.

What sort of definition can be derived from the conclusions which have just been summarized? No matter what importance may be given to these two men as founders, as critics whose precept and practice guided others, it is impossible to decide from their works alone what the essential nature of "Romanticism" is. On the basis of their own use of terms it would be possible to question whether they themselves should be included among the "Romantics," since the term was used in Germany only after Herder's most important works had been written, and since there is no evidence that Wordsworth used the term at all. Yet usage dies hard, and both Herder and Wordsworth have long been lodged in the vast critical bin of "Romanticism." To pick out two men of

similar ideas and to insist upon using those two as a standard by which to measure a great number of others, is arbitrary in the extreme and certain to find no acceptance beyond the inventor of that standard.

Certainly it seems impossible that any standard erected from the principles of men like Wordsworth and Herder should be applied to the works of a man like Byron. Wordsworth did condemn them utterly; one would expect Herder to do the same. Yet there are other men, with whom there is the possibility of comparison. Both Herder and Wordsworth had wide influence through their criticism and through their poetry, although Herder's own poetry was far less effective than were his translations. A great many writers owed somewhere in the development of their own styles a debt to either Herder or Wordsworth. Nor is it necessary always to assume an influence from one mind to another, since similar ideas may very well be created under similar conditions, without any interdependence of minds. The most that can be said is that the ideas of Wordsworth and Herder were influential, and for a number of writers extremely important, but that to establish their ideas as the normal form of "Romanticism," from which all deviation is error or "un-Romanticism," would be to assume an untenable position.

Since, then, it is impossible to erect a defiinition upon so small a basis, it may be possible to fit the ideas of Herder and Wordsworth into an already existent pattern, to find some already formulated definition which will include them with a large group of others. The list of definitions in Professor Bernbaum's *Guide Through the Romantic Movement* is enough to make one hesitate.[1] The majority of the definitions there listed are applicable to some part of the whole, and many of them indicate a preference or dislike for the subject under discussion. The range of forms and emotions which so many individuals of intelligence and perception have been able to identify with "Romanticism" is in itself confusing.

Like Professor Lovejoy,[2] Professor Bernbaum refuses to

1. **op. cit.**, Thomas Nelson and Company: New York, 1938, pp.441-442
2. A. O. Lovejoy, "On the Discrimination of Romanticisms," **PMLA**, XXXIX (1924), 229 ff.

set down a formal definition, but is willing to state the terms of a religious and philosophical attitude with which he finds the ideas of the leading Romanticists sympathetic. This belief is that there are two worlds, the world of ideas and the actual world of experience. The contrast between these worlds may force a man into dejection or indignation or may force him to the effort to find some connection between the two worlds. This latter effort may result in the faith that:

> Man was gifted with a higher reason, called the imagination, which enabled him to see that the good, the true, and the beautiful were not removed to a sphere unattainable to us in this life, but were interwoven with our human existence and earthly environment. It was the highest function of literature and art to portray man and his world in such a way that the presence of the infinite within the finite, of the ideal within the actual, would be revealed in all its beauty.[3]

Clearly, both Herder and Wordsworth fit this statement, as can be seen from the brief summary of the similarities of their ideas, earlier in this chapter. Yet a statement of an important characteristic cannot be regarded as a delimitation of principles.

Professor Bernbaum has approached the problem primarily from the point of view of the student of literature; Professor Lovejoy's interest has been more nearly that of the professional philosopher. He too, after a rapid survey of existent definitions, agrees that no hope of agreement can be drawn from such discord, and refuses the task of framing a new definition. Like Professor Bernbaum, he feels that certain tendencies can be discriminated and that an approach to knowledge of the Romantic Movement may come through a discrimination and cataloguing of these tendencies.[4] In a recent article,[5] he states three tendencies of German Romanticism which he feels helped to shape the catastrophe of the

3. Bernbaum, **op. cit.**, pp.446-47

4. Lovejoy, **op. cit.**, p.252

5. Lovejoy, "The Meaning of Romanticism for the Historian of Ideas", **Journal of the History of Ideas**, II (1941), 257 ff.

present day. These tendencies are *das Ganze, Streben, Eigentümlichkeit,* or, as he translates them, "holism, voluntarism or 'dynamism,' and diversitarianism."[6] These tendencies are all present in Herder and Wordsworth: the feeling that society is organic, a unit; that society is developing and changing and the individual along with it; that each individual has peculiarities and idiosyncrasies which set him off from the rest of mankind. In both Herder and Wordsworth the striving of the individual is understood as a striving toward the deity and not a conscious denial of his surroundings, a corollary which belongs later in the development of Romantic thought.

It seems undeniable that these three ideas underlie much of the confusion in the world today, that developments from them have caused a great deal of havoc. It cannot be stressed too heavily, however, that these developments can hardly be considered the responsibility of Herder and Wordsworth. Their ideas of the relation of the individual to the entire nation have developed into a chauvinistic nationalism, not only in Germany but also in other states.[7] Their ideas concerning the striving of the individual were not intended to provoke strife among men. From the belief in man's individuality, they drew the conclusion of tolerance, that each man had a right to be himself and to develop separately. Others have drawn the conclusion of intolerance: that one's idiosyncrasies and those of one's nation are to be cherished to the exclusion and detriment of individuality in the rest of mankind and in other nations.

If then, no single definition can be satisfactory, if one cannot include in a single statement the various ideas of the period, it will be necessary, in order to arrive at some understanding of the concept of Romanticism, to analyze and to compare, to attempt to see what basic ideas of different men contributed to the whole. If the present is the inheritor of the past, we should scrutinize our inheritance before we blame

6. **Ibid.,** p.272
7. K. Bittner, **Herders Geschichtsphilosophie und die Slawen, Reichenberg,** 1929

it. Such a study as this one, a study in comparative ideas, is an attempt to see some of the roots of the present, to understand at least one part of a revolution in thought. This study has been an attempt to break down a complicated abstraction and to see whether any of its content was capable of exact definition. It can be said that there were specific similarities between the ideas of Herder and Wordsworth; that their views of man, of nature and society were closely allied; and that, as a consequence, some basis of comparison between thought in England and thought in Germany at the period usually called "the Romantic Period" is possible.

VITA

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